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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Stalin's Ghost in Contemporary Soviet Politics

Summary

After thirty years, the assessment of Joseph Stalin's historical role remains a controversial and highly charged political issue. The Soviet leadership attempts to manipulate the Stalin myth to promote regime legitimacy--steering clear of any endorsement of the "negative" aspects of his rule--while elites use the Stalin symbol to promote or oppose policies associated with his name. Like his immediate predecessors, Gorbachev has adopted a differentiated approach toward the Stalin issue. He has publicly praised Stalin's wartime role and the highly centralized and disciplined Stalinist economic system, but he has resisted any larger rehabilitation of the dictator. Some straws in the wind suggest that Gorbachev may favor a limited relaxation of Stalinist strictures on cultural life and on intra-party policy discussions while continuing to tighten the screws on overt dissidents. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and questions may be directed to the author [redacted] or the Chief, Domestic Policy Division, on [redacted]

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Despite the passage of more than 30 years, treatment of Joseph Stalin and his policies remains a highly charged political issue. The images conjured up by references to Stalin are both internally contradictory and inconsistent in their impact on various elements of the Soviet populace. This presents both a problem and an opportunity for the regime. Soviet domestic propaganda attempts to exploit broad public nostalgia for such "positive" aspects of Stalin's rule as national unity and social order, economic progress and efficiency, and strong leadership--as a means of shoring up regime legitimacy at home and marshaling support for the USSR's international role--while avoiding endorsement of the "negative" aspects of his leadership that frighten important segments of the public. [redacted]

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At the same time, the Stalin symbol is employed in intra-elite politics to promote or oppose various policies associated with his name. As with the general public, however, elite political sensitivities about Stalin are so powerful that use of his image as a political weapon can backfire unless great care is exercised. Indiscriminate praise of Stalin would antagonize key elites, such as the military and the more liberal elements of the intelligentsia, who suffered greatly during the purge years. A blanket condemnation of him, however, would alienate those rightwing intellectual and managerial elites who see Stalin as a symbol of the established order and who might fear that renewing the attack on him would undermine regime legitimacy. [redacted]

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Evolution of Treatment of Stalin

From his death until 1979. The dominant desire of most of the Soviet elite and general population in the years immediately following Stalin's death was for a relaxation of Stalinist internal controls. Khrushchev attempted to exploit this yearning for political ends by moving toward a limited "destalinization." He associated himself with the exposure of Stalin's abuses of power, ended political terror, rehabilitated many purge victims, and permitted a "thaw" in cultural and intellectual life. Equally as important, Khrushchev capitalized on the Stalin issue to purge the KGB and to move against rivals within the leadership closely identified with Stalin. [redacted]

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Khrushchev's condemnation of the worst abuses of Stalin alarmed many other leaders, who were concerned that going too far toward destalinization might prove politically destabilizing and who feared being implicated in Stalin's crimes. Immediately after Khrushchev's removal in October 1964, the official denigration of Stalin was halted, and a period of uneasy official silence about the dictator settled in. During this period Soviet leaders occasionally commented favorably on Stalin's wartime role or disparaged his violations of "Soviet legality." Generally, however, references to Stalin were avoided and no clear-cut "line" on the Stalin issue emerged. [redacted]

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BOXED TEXTStalin as Issue and Symbol

To the various elements of the elite and the population, Stalin evokes different images. These include:

- national unity and power. Military might and international prestige, Russian domination over Eastern Europe and over minorities at home, victory in World War II (but also failure to prepare adequately for the war).
- economic progress. Rapid industrialization, full employment, upward social mobility.
- economic centralization and efficiency. A tightly organized command economy, strong central control over planning and management, opposition to economic reform.
- strong leadership and lack of elite security. Personal dictatorship, a cult of Stalin's person, complete subordination of the military officer corps, random purges of the party apparatus.
- brutality and repression of the population. Unrestrained KGB use of terror, forced collectivization, lack of worker job security, strict ideological controls on cultural and intellectual life, tight restrictions on non-Russian nationalities and religious believers.
- social order and cohesion. Discipline across the board, harsh penalties for crime and deviation, a shared vision of social goals, puritanical norms for family and private life.

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END OF BOXED TEXT

[redacted]

Since 1979. By the late 1970s several developments impelled many citizens and lower-level elites to move toward a more positive appraisal of Stalin:

- o Economic growth rates declined and class lines hardened, causing many Soviets to recall with nostalgia the "good old days" under Stalin, when rapid industrialization created vast opportunities for upward social mobility.
- o The memory of Stalin's repressions ebbed, official ideology grew stale, and popular cynicism about regime propaganda increased.
- o Society became less orderly and disciplined, and social pathologies such as crime and corruption grew.
- o Many citizens unfavorably contrasted the drift of policy under Brezhnev with the tough leadership associated with Stalin. [redacted]

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[redacted] since the late 1970s has indicated that many Soviet citizens from various walks of life have become increasingly attracted to the Stalin symbol. [redacted]

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Soviet youth are especially inclined to see Stalin as a positive and heroic figure. A recent USIA poll of Westerners who have had extensive contact with Soviet elites suggested that about 85 percent of senior Soviet officials and 67 percent of middle-level officials felt that the Soviet people need a strong leader, although many of them preferred a leader more tolerant and "sophisticated" than Stalin was. [redacted]

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As a consequence of these phenomena, in 1979, on the 100th anniversary of Stalin's birth, the regime articulated an official policy on the public portrayal of Stalin's historical role designed to exploit the Stalin "myth"--and, in particular, the World War II years--to legitimize the system and strengthen patriotism. The new party line portrayed the dictator as a "complicated" leader who deserves credit for his contributions--particularly his wartime leadership of the country--but whose "errors and blunders" and "gross violations" of law cannot be ignored. A 1979 article in the authoritative party journal Kommunist took the same tack, calling Stalin "neither an angel nor a demon," and this view of Stalin became standard. [redacted]

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By maintaining that each aspect of Stalin's activity must be considered discretely in its own particular historical context, the regime ruled out an overall evaluation of Stalin and attempted to ward off inferences that Stalin's personal "excesses" were in any way endemic to the Soviet system or that other Soviet leaders could be linked to his deeds--notions which have been anathema to the regime since Khrushchev first exposed

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Stalin's crimes in 1956. In actual practice, however, the official line--by providing for both positive and negative portrayals--has encouraged a continued veiled debate about Stalin in the Soviet media. []

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Current Debate Over Stalin. Brezhnev's death and the ensuing leadership review of internal policy in a succession environment have given impetus to the debate within the Soviet elite over how to deal with the Stalin issue. Some Soviet commentators have pushed harder to extend the selective rehabilitation of Stalin as war leader to more sensitive areas of his rule, while others have voiced criticism of his policies. []

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Stalin's wartime role remains a controversial issue. Over the past year and a half, propagandists have unleashed a flood of new films and printed materials in celebration of the 40th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany. Much of this propaganda provides extensive and positive treatment of Stalin's leadership. []

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But recent media references to Stalin have not been uniformly positive. In two major World War II documentaries--a film on Marshal Zhukov's life released in December 1984 and a March 1985 television film--Stalin was shown ignoring or rejecting the advice of military leaders to prepare for war. A previously unpublished section of the memoirs of former Politburo member and close Stalin associate Anastas Mikoyan that appeared in a recent issue of an important historical journal also presents a negative picture of Stalin. He is depicted as rejecting warnings of other leaders on the eve of the war and failing to give strong leadership after the Nazi attack. A selection from Zhukov's reminiscences published in Izvestiya in May 1985 and a tribute to former Defense Minister Ustinov in a March 1985 issue of Sovetskaya Rossiya portrayed Stalin as highhanded and unfair in his treatment of subordinates. []

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Aside from continued ambivalence about Stalin's behavior as a wartime leader, there have been new signs of controversy over his general reputation. Some elites have pushed for a broader rehabilitation of Stalin:

- o An authority on Lenin described Stalin in a November 1984 Sovetskaya Rossiya article as a vital supporter of Lenin in 1917 and one of a new "finely honed type of professional revolutionary."
- o A May 1985 Sovetskaya Rossiya literary review article tried to exonerate Stalin from persecution of peasants during collectivization and to present him as the voice of moderation and mercy during the "tragic events" of 1933.

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- o In 1983 a novel by Ivan Stadnyuk, which portrayed Stalin as a basically sympathetic figure and was attacked in the media in 1974 for historical inaccuracies, was pulled out of obscurity and awarded the State Prize for Literature. The Komsomol's literary journal Molodaya Gvardiya recently serialized another Stadnyuk novel, which praises Stalin not only as a wartime strategist but also as a compassionate person.
- o A historical World War II novel by the conservative editor of Literaturnaya Gazeta, Aleksandr Chakovsky, serialized in 1983-84, showed Stalin as a wise and firm diplomat who outshone Roosevelt. []

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At the same time, critical media references to Stalin continue to appear:

- o A January 1984 Izvestiya article stated that Stalin's erroneous nationalities policy was "refuted" by Lenin during his last days. Last year articles by two Central Committee officials in the journal Voprosy Filosofii repudiated Stalin's theory that the class struggle intensifies as socialism develops--which he used to justify repression of ethnic and social groups.
- o The reformist economist Yevgeniy Ambartsumov in a 1984 Molodoy Kommunist article criticized Stalin's adherence to only the repressive aspects of Lenin's teachings.
- o Literaturnaya Gazeta in April 1985 and Izvestiya in May 1985 implicitly condemned Stalin's purges.
- o The prominent poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko--whose poem published in Pravda in 1962 was one of the most famous public attacks on Stalin in the Khrushchev period--has again publicly derided him. A new Yevtushenko poem in the 9 September Pravda indirectly maligned Stalin (without naming him) by mocking Trofim Lysenko--the pseudo-geneticist who was a favorite of Stalin. The poem also criticized Stalin's refusal to allow the USSR to enter the computer age and his repression of Bulgakov's innovative novel Master and Margarita. []

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The proliferation of both positive and negative references to Stalin suggest heightened debate over whether to move toward greater reform or greater repression in various areas--including economic, cultural and nationalities policies. []

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Gorbachev's Position

Like his immediate predecessors, Gorbachev appears to have adopted a differentiated approach toward the Stalin issue. A self-described friend from their student days at Moscow State University law school--the emigre former Czech Communist Party

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secretary Zdenek Mlynar--has written that in 1952 Gorbachev confided his distaste for Stalin's arrests of political opponents. Also, there are some indications that he has resisted the efforts of leaders who want to go further in rehabilitating Stalin. On the other hand, he clearly sees a political value in evoking Stalin's name to gain support for some of the policies he is promoting. [REDACTED]

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In his 8 May 1985 speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, Gorbachev referred to Stalin as head of the State Defense Committee which, together with the Central Committee, guided the party's "gigantic" war effort. Gorbachev praised the "efficiency" of Stalin's centralized war economy, which was guaranteed by the "immutable authority" of the state plan, "discipline and strict responsibility," "initiative" of workers and scientists, and the "organizing abilities" of industrial managers. This statement could be read as Gorbachev's own prescription for economic success and as an appeal for support for his discipline and order campaigns. Gorbachev probably was also sensitive to the need to allay fears that he would institute radical liberalizing changes and to rally support among the military and conservative elements in the bureaucracy and population. Gorbachev balanced these positive remarks, however, by listing "miscalculations on our side" as one of the factors that contributed to the early wartime defeats. [REDACTED]

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The remarks offered by Gorbachev on this occasion appear to have been carefully calibrated to present a modulated picture of Stalin as a complex figure worthy of both praise and blame for specifically identified actions. This approach is consistent with Gorbachev's insistence that official spokesmen must discuss problems more openly so as to enhance the credibility of regime propaganda. Thus, in his speech to the December 1984 party ideological conference, Gorbachev recommended a more realistic portrayal of Soviet history, stating that although the USSR has achieved "great victories," it has experienced "errors, failures, and mistakes" as well. A Pravda editorial of 17 January 1985 elaborated this theme, arguing that history must be examined in all its complexity and not "rewritten or erased." Matter-of-fact media references to some other controversial Soviet historical figures, such as Khrushchev, have increased over the past year or two. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] suggests that Gorbachev is not in favor of any general rehabilitation of Stalin. He reportedly opposed a proposal made in the spring of 1985 to change the name of Volgograd--site of the USSR's greatest wartime victory--back to Stalingrad before the World War II anniversary celebrations. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] then Politburo member Grigory Romanov strongly supported renaming Volgograd and his clash with Gorbachev over this issue became part of an ongoing political battle between the two men, leading to a "very serious" situation prior to Romanov's ouster from the Politburo. [REDACTED]

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Despite Gorbachev's efforts to tighten discipline and strengthen social order, there are straws in the wind suggesting that he might be inclined to move in the direction of limited relaxation of strictures in some areas of Soviet life:

- o Yevtushenko, in a bold mid-December speech to the Russian Republic Writers Union leaked to western journalists, insisted that Soviet writers must confront politically sensitive topics that have long been taboo. He called for honest accounts of Stalin's purges and the collectivization of agriculture, and frank treatment of current corruption among privileged Soviet officials. The failure of the Soviet press to report his most critical remarks in its account of the speech suggests that he was testing the limits of official toleration of criticism. But Pravda's publication in September of his poem critical of Stalin's repression of writers and the regime's willingness to let him address the Writers Congress suggest that his general position on this question has the support of some Soviet leaders.

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- o The new draft of the CPSU Program published in October includes a negative reference to the "personality cult"-- a codeword for Stalin's abuse of power.

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It is possible that Gorbachev--although probably an admirer of Stalin's centralized economic organization and tight management of society--is also more inclined than some leaders to permit expanded internal party discussion of policy options. Yevtushenko's speech, the publication of his anti-Stalinist poem, and the appearance of a few other literary works by relatively liberal writers, suggest that Gorbachev may be seeking ways of making cultural life more appealing to Soviet intellectuals, even as he tightens the screws on overt dissidents.

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Prospects

The Stalin issue will remain a political "hot potato" and a bellweather of regime priorities as Gorbachev fleshes out his programs in the coming months. The regime may find it easier to

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deal with the issue of Stalin's crimes in a few years, after Stalin's few remaining lieutenants have left the scene.¹ But the party formula of selective rehabilitation harbors fundamental contradictions. The regime's desire to create a more neutral and believable historical record conflicts with its determination to convey the impression that Stalin was an aberration in an otherwise flawless system. The attempt to exploit the Stalin symbol as a source of legitimacy conflicts with the goal of avoiding association of the leadership with the negative aspects of his rule. Moreover, if Gorbachev moves very far to expand the parameters of permissible discussion of the Stalin period, it could prove difficult to control the process. As happened during the cultural "thaw" under Khrushchev, a limited relaxation of strictures encourages pressure from intellectuals for further liberalization. This, in turn, tends to generate counterpressures within the elite that could reverse the process. These dilemmas will not be easily resolved. [redacted]

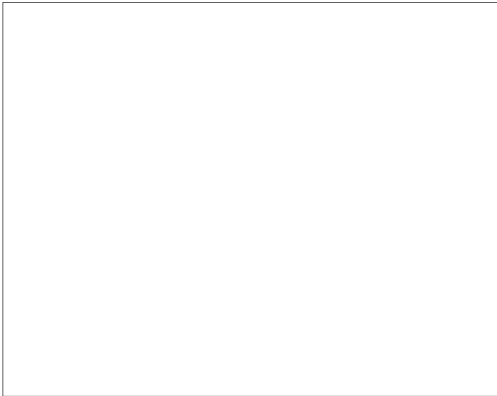
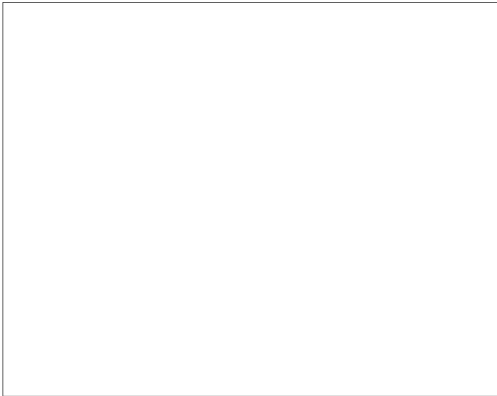
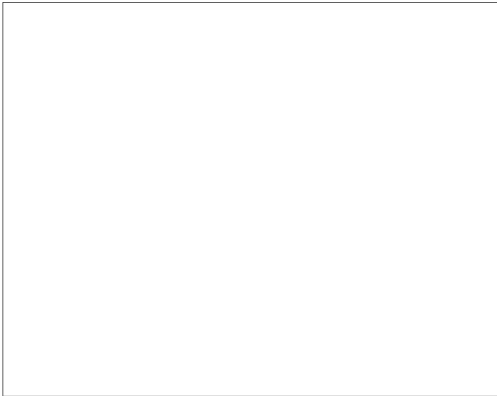
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¹ Vyacheslav Molotov--Stalin's foreign minister and premier--was readmitted to the party in March 1984, on his 94th birthday, after a gap of over 20 years. [redacted]

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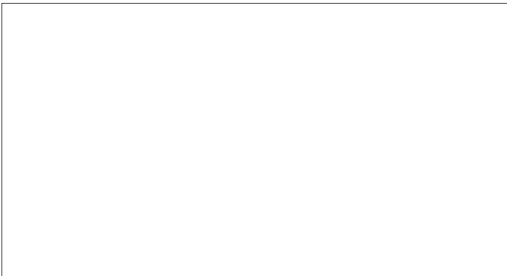


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